

DOUGLAS UNDER FIRE: An Account of Villa's Battle for Agua Prieta

by Carl H. Cole

Almost due west of the towns of Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta in Mexico is the beautiful cone of the mountain called San Pedro. The road to Cananea, Sonora skirts the south of San Pedro on a rising slope. About 12 miles out that road is a notch in the ridge which is named Anavacachi Pass. On October 22nd, 1915 this pass was filled with the army of Pancho Villa's Sonoran 'Jefe', the Yaqui General Urbalejo. The day before, this force had taken the border town, Naco, in a bloodless exchange of power, the defending troops quietly withdrawing to the main army in Agua Prieta.

A week earlier, Colonel Beltran with 200 men secured Cananea for Villa. In that incident the Carranza forces retreated northwest to Nogales, destroying the railroad as they went. Isolated, Cananea was by now running short of food and fuel.

General Mendez, in command of about 600 troops, mostly cavalry, moved into Esqueda, 20 miles south of Agua Prieta. Mendez represented the Villa advance guard and by straddling the rails to Nacozari, closed the door to the south.

And a final item: the main body of Villa's forces, a column of soldiers, guns, baggage wagons and camp followers estimated to be 20 miles long was slowly advancing north into the San Bernardino Valley from the Sierra Madre mountains. The first estimates of the numbers in this column ran "...2600 soldiers, mostly mounted."

Those whose loyalty lay with Carranza or whose interests were opposed to further anarchy were being crowded into Nogales and Agua Prieta; nearly 2000 refugees entered the latter town in a three day period, prompting an urgent request for food and clothing, sixty thousand dollars worth.

This pattern of movement northward: the evacuation from Hermosillo, the occupation of Cananea, Naco and Esqueda, and the blocking of Anavacachi were all parts of the tightening noose around Agua Prieta. This was the ground which Villa would attack and the town which the Carranza forces would defend.

Such scurrying for protection or position was driven by fear and love respectively for the man leading his army up from the south. Francisco (Pancho) Villa, born Doroteo Aranga, in four years of revolutionary battles had honestly earned that fear and that love. He had been among the earliest to declare against the rule of Huerta after the assassination of the duly elected Francisco Madero.

Zapata, from the state of Morelos in the south, was also one of the first; and many others joined in the effort to oust Huerta. One of these was Venustiano Carranza who presented himself as candidate to be the next head of state. It can be argued whether Villa also sought that position or not; in either case he was by now the declared enemy of Carranza, the bearded, ex-school teacher from Coahuila.

Villa's support came mainly from peasants, to whom he promised loot and land, peasants mostly from his own home state of Chihuahua. Of all the revolutionary leaders, none generated more passionate feelings or more admiration. His humble beginnings and lack of education appealed to the masses and his personal flair earned devotion. In Mexico he was dubbed 'Centaur of the North', and the U.S. Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, likened Villa to Sir Galahad! Villa had tried repeatedly to lure the Gringos' support; he was polite to American reporters and actively sought help from U.S. mercenaries. In January of 1915 posters appeared along the border inviting:

*** DYNAMITERS *** MACHINE GUNNERS *** RAILROADERS ***
Ride With PANCHO VILLA for GOLD and GLORY *** Viva Revolution ***.

Mexico's revolution took on all the characteristics of a civil war once Huerta was forced out. Several factions vied actively to fill the leadership vacuum and while Villa was daring in battle and had captured the attention of the U.S. press, Carranza proved to be more adroit. By whatever promises necessary, he had enlisted the loyalty of the two leading generals in the north: Álvaro Obregon and Plutarco Eliás Calles. Obregon had twice defeated Villa in pitched battles in the summer of 1915, promoting Carranza as the most likely leader and earning Villa's hatred. These recent defeats in battle combined with emerging stories of his savagery tarnished his glamour. Villa badly needed a border victory which would both re-establish his reputation as an invincible leader and set up a U.S. supply point for his troops. Agua Prieta was targeted to fill that need.

His bid for a new image came too late however. What Villa didn't know was that President Wilson was preparing to end the unrest in the south by recognizing Carranza as chief of state **de jure**. Possibly it was the appeal of one ex-school teacher for another; more likely, Carranza simply held most of the high cards. In either case, on Wednesday, October 20th, newspapers announced that the U.S. had formally recognized the claim of Carranza to lead Mexico. **The New York World** agreed that Carranza, "although not imposing was better than the anarchy of Huerta", and dismissed Villa and Zapata as "brigands".

During the revolution American attitudes had ranged from alarm through condescension and even amusement at the antics of 'our little brown brothers'.

Now however, having recognized Carranza the U.S. could not risk any chance that its choice was the wrong one. The way to remove any doubt was of course, to guarantee that Carranza should win. This the U.S. was prepared to do. General Calles was in command of 7000 troops defending Agua Prieta, and it was vitally important to know how big Villa's force was. This was difficult to guess for as the **Douglas Daily Dispatch** put it: "The estimates of numbers vary greatly according to the excitability of the person talking, ranging from 6000 to 20,000. The latter is considered ridiculous." Ridiculous or not, one dare not ignore the psychological factors; these were not just rebels, these were Pancho Villa's Dorados! Enough of Villa's charisma still existed to give his enemies a shiver of fear.

To offset any psychological edge it was proposed to reinforce the defenders, but in order to be effective it would have to be immediate. The nearest available troops were in General Benjamine Hill's command of 2000 in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. The United States offered to move them via the SP Railway from Laredo to Douglas where they would be crossed back to Mexico. The legal and ethical questions involved in transporting foreign armed troops through a neutral country were dismissed and Hill's army with its attendant supplies and ammunition was boarded on October 27th. None of these arrangements were known to Villa, not yet.

Douglas is separated from Agua Prieta by a wire fence. Politically and culturally it marks a huge gap but to bullets and artillery shells it does not exist. First Street in Douglas parallels the border a few hundred feet away. Each subsequent block is about 300 feet further from the international boundary. Tenth Street which is the residential main street is therefore about half a mile from Mexico. It is understandable then that the residents of Douglas exhibited alarm when it became obvious that a battle would be fought.

The U.S. State Department acted speedily. The day after recognizing Carranza, special representative George C. Carothers was ordered to Douglas to protect Americans from the Villistas. The mayor of Douglas, C. O. Ellis, was apparently not impressed by the visiting heavyweight for he wired the War Department in Washington demanding that the attack on Agua Prieta be "not allowed." His telegram went on to say that: "The lives of 20,000 Americans will be jeopardized if Villa is permitted to come within artillery range". In answer, the commanding officer in Douglas was given authorization to cross into Agua Prieta, "...if this would appear necessary to defend the city". In addition, the War Department assigned its own envoy, General Funston, and reported that his strategy would be to use artillery against "the outlaw Villa." As a final assurance two more U.S. infantry regiments arrived from El Paso.

South of Agua Prieta the noose tightened. Colonel Mendez moved north along the Nacozari railroad first to Fronteras then to Cabullona just twelve miles away. Urbalejo moved his troops eastward to link with the main body of Villa's army which was advancing slowly toward the border east of Agua Prieta. John Slaughter's ranch straddled the line at that point, some twenty miles out. It was here where Villa first heard that the U.S. was reinforcing Calles and, even more serious, that the United States had formally recognized the government of Carranza. Villa was furious. The U.S., he declared, was ungrateful for the protection he had given to Gringos and to their property; he swore that he would no longer honor that policy. He threatened to take Douglas himself if he was fired upon from the U.S. From the west General Urbalejo promised to retaliate against U.S. property in Naco and Cananea if the U.S. intervened. The **Douglas Daily Dispatch** characterized this mood as: "Inflamed Against the United States" and at the same time: "Heartened by Promise of Lots of Loot if Douglas is Captured."

On Saturday, Oct. 30th, the first armed engagements took place. Two cavalry detachments from Agua Prieta contacted the Villistas, one at Cabullona the other on the Cananea road. According to Calles' report, in both actions they drove the rebels back.

Reports came in from Villa's camp south of Slaughter's ranch. An aide, Col. Franco claimed that Villa's force consisted of 18,000 men, sixty 80 mm cannon and "all the ammunition he needed." Villa's claims were more modest: he had "only 13,000 men", he said, but with these he was going to "come calling on Calles" and that the battle would be over in an hour. He went on to say that he would take on all the Carranza forces **and** the U.S. army at the same time if necessary!

There was other, less sanguine evidence however: a sixteen year old, a soldier from the Mendez outpost, who received a shattered hip in the Cabullona skirmish reported from the Agua Prieta hospital that Villa had no food other than beef, had had no flour or beans for many weeks. A group of American workmen helped many of Villa's soldiers by giving them water. They filled canteens passed through the fence until Calles' protest forced them to stop.

On the American side, preparations for the battle started with a full alert for the military, all passes were cancelled even though the Commander, General Davis, "...doubted that there would be an attack, under the circumstances." He did, however, issue this warning: Keep off the streets during battle and stay home! The area between Fifth and Sixth Streets was defined as the line of retirement for the Army. They dug trenches east to the hills, "A series of mutually supporting strong points," on a line some 400 yards north of the border. Douglas schools were ordered closed. Of the two smelters operating, the Calumet & Arizona made news when its Superintendent, H. A. Clark, declared, "We will have to be directly bombarded before we will pull our fires".

Approximately 2300 Mexican refugees, mostly women and children, were passed across the border by special permission of the Immigration Service. They were installed temporarily in the stock loading pens just west of the city. Here they were safe even though food and blankets were in short supply and they were exposed to the weather.

A participant in the battle who was recently interviewed in Kino Bay, Sonora explained that barbed wire was strung outside of trenches dug in a semicircle around Agua Prieta. This man, Edmundo de la Rosa, was conscripted into Calles' army and served as a machine-gunner in those trenches. Incidentally, he maintains that Villa's attacking force was never more than 600 soldiers, total!

And so, on Monday, November first, we come to the battle of Agua Prieta.

Villa's artillery started firing at 1:15 Monday afternoon and continued intermittently all day. The defenders' guns answered when there was a target. It shortly became clear that a daylight assault would not come against such a formidable defense. During that night, actually the next morning at 1:50 a.m., the main attack on Agua Prieta began. There was continuous noise from artillery fire, the bursting of shells, and both rifle and machine gun shots. For this battle the whole area was lighted by large carbon-arc lights, provided, it is reported, by the U.S. Army Engineers. These lights were among the early casualties; all were finally knocked out and two of the six operators were killed. It was over soon and suddenly. At about four in the morning the attacking guns fired three rounds of shrapnel over the town, then ceased.

Calles issued an early report of light casualties, 45 dead and 90 wounded. None of Villa's men broke through the defense perimeter. Only a few came close to the barbed wire as their bodies attested in the morning. Sr. de la Rosa remembers that the biggest problem he experienced was that of noise and dust; he claimed to have been deafened for two weeks after the battle.

Villa and his Dorados, defeated for the first time in Sonora, withdrew southward toward Cabullona. There he met and joined Urbalejo; they both moved to Naco that same day. In Naco the army took an uneasy rest while Villa prepared his Naco Manifesto in which he claimed that Carranza had granted mining and business concessions to the Gringos in return for their help in defeating Villa. On Thursday, starving Villistas were reported raiding in Cananea for food and supplies. When the main body of the army reached Cananea, they demanded and were paid twenty thousand American dollars by The Four C Copper Company. Villa's reported strategy was to leave about 4000 troops in Sonora to maintain a presence, the rest would switch to guerrilla tactics, retiring to Chihuahua in small bands. When asked if Calles pursued Villa, de la Rosa smiled and said, "Yes, but not too close".



Insurrectos? "Yes?"

Back in Agua Prieta the clean-up started. Calles declared an amnesty for Villa deserters and there were bunches--47 the day after the battle, all nearly starving. The dead were collected. A cemetery on the southern edge of town was where 15 soldiers fell, one appeared to be no more than 12 years old. By late Wednesday the bodies, including many animals, were beginning to decay and the Mexicans could not cremate them because of the shortage of fuel. The Standard Oil dealer in Douglas provided fuel oil and the cremation took place. In all, there were some two to three hundred bodies.

Douglas survived the battle. Of the thousands of bullets and shells fired northward, 9 struck and wounded Americans, one killed an American soldier. The Bank of Douglas and The Gadsden Hotel were scarred as were many other houses. The dead soldier was Pvt. Harry J. Jones who was struck in his ammunition belt by a stray bullet, this set off his own bullets fatally wounding him. It was first reported in the **Douglas Daily Dispatch** that he was struck while sleeping on the edge of his fox-hole, sleeping outside because his trench mate was such an uneasy sleeper. This story was immediately amended to indicate that he had been walking his guard post at an ammunition hut. Whatever the truth, he achieved a measure of fame in that the Douglas military base became officially Camp Harry J. Jones.

Douglas began to empty of curiosity seekers. On Monday and Tuesday during the battle the town's hotels, lodgings and homes had been filled to capacity; many had slept in pool halls, hotel lobbies or had simply walked the streets. One of those curious visitors became a late casualty: while hunting souvenirs on the U.S. side of the border, he was ordered away by a Mexican guard; when he refused he was ordered to accompany the soldier to his commander in Agua Prieta. When he declined this invitation he was fired upon and struck in the foot; the soldier fled.

That this battle achieved some national attention was reflected in the southwestern press. Editorial comment mostly took it lightly:

The Dallas News: "Both the Mexican armies seem to hone for Agua Prieta but at this distance we can't understand why either side wants it."

Albuquerque Journal: "Villa is going as far away from barbed wire (as he can) but he is not taking **all** his men with him."



A short ten days later the whole affair was nearly forgotten. Villa's whereabouts was declared "...a mystery", and the complete front page headlines of the **Dispatch** on Nov. 11, 1915 were as follows:

AMERICANS VICTIMS OF SUBMARINE, SAYS PAGE	
BULGARIAN ATTACK IS WITHSTOOD BY ALLIES	BRITISH BANKS WANT CREDIT IN US
SIXTY KILLED BY TORNADO IN KANSAS	
CARRANZA OFFICIALS LEAVE FOR CAPITOL	

Truly, Pancho Villa's battle for Agua Prieta was over.

Notes and Acknowledgements

I have a more-than-passing interest in this particular battle because I was there, aged three weeks at the time. Our family history has it that we moved from the bedrooms, on the south side of the house, to the living room area for the duration of the danger from northbound bullets. It is understandable, then that my interest quickens at the mention of this particular incident in the Mexican Revolution.

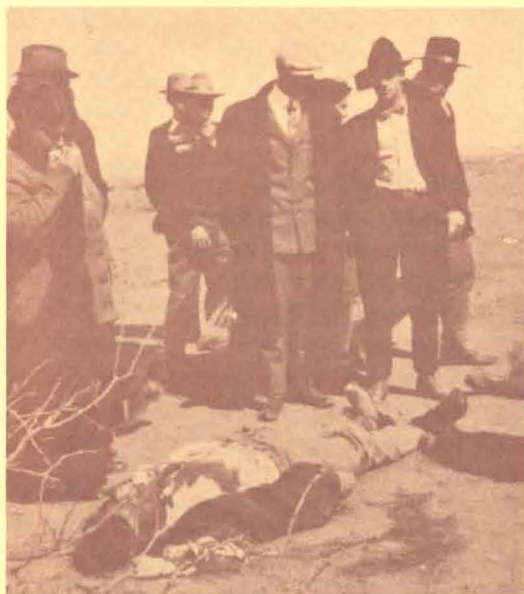
Over the past few years I have spent a great deal of time in Mexico where I have incidentally found a few bits of information which I felt were not known; also I met and interviewed a participant in that battle. These things whetted my appetite but nothing further would have happened had not Mrs. Margie Conder encouraged me. She did more, she introduced me to Mr. Loney at the Douglas Daily Dispatch, whose microfilms of the period provided the detailed story of the battle on a day by day basis. Mrs. Conder is well known to Douglas residents as teacher at the High School and native resident of Douglas until last year. I want to hereby thank her for that help and encouragement.

About the Author

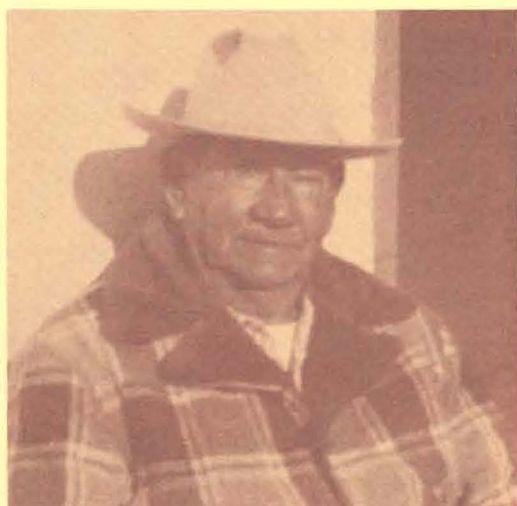
Carl H. Cole spent his first seventeen years in Douglas; went to Clawson School and the old 12th Street High School. He graduated from the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1938, with a B.A. in History. Married Helene Weathersby of Tucson in 1939. Spent the war years in Los Angeles where two sons were born.

For fifteen years was with AiResearch in Phoenix, the last three as manager of Support Sales covering all of Western Europe, based in Geneva, Switzerland. Upon retiring in 1967, Cole returned to school in Flagstaff, earning his M.A. in History in 1968, and serving at N.A.U. as Instructor in Humanities until 1973.

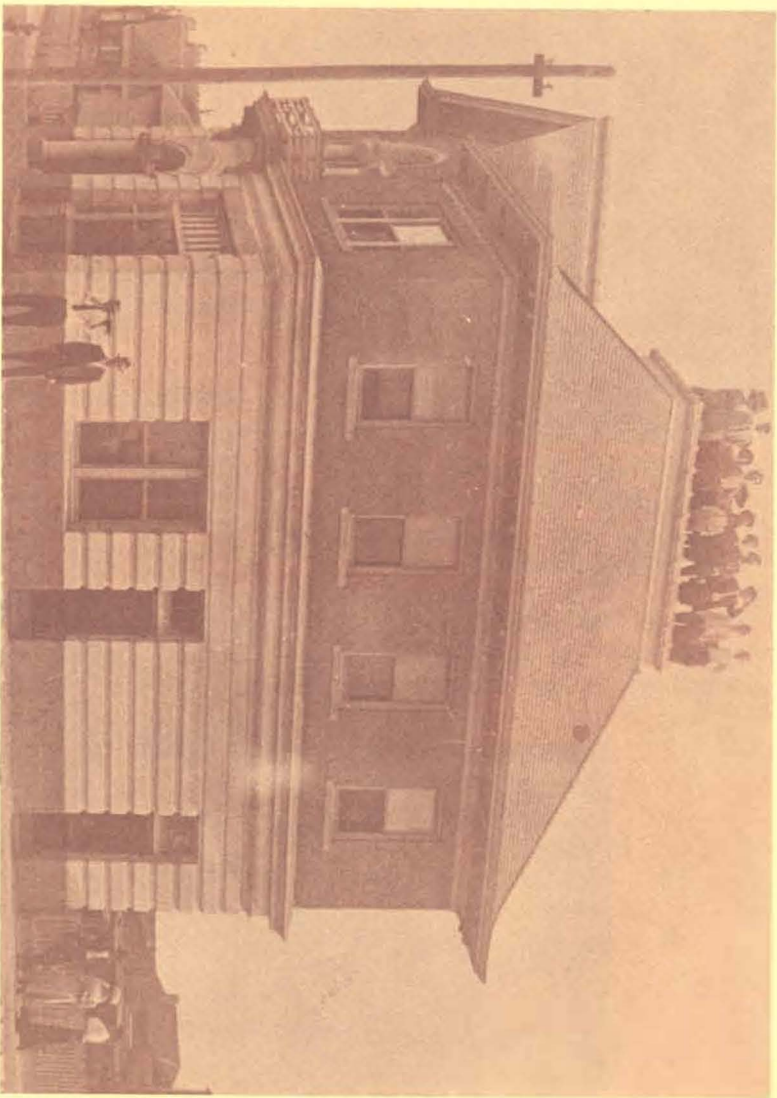
The Coles now divide their time between Kino Bay, Sonora and Prescott. Their two sons live in Oregon and Northern California and have given the Coles seven grandchildren.



This photo was taken by my uncle, A. C. Cole, of a dead soldier in Cananea. My father, C. H. Cole, is the man wearing the cap in center. (Caption by author)



Edmundo de la Rosa at his home in Kino Bay, Sonora, where he is retired. He was a conscript into Calles' army at age 15, participated in the defense of Agua Prieta in November 1915. (Photo by author taken 1983.)



Watching the battle at Agua Prieta